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## A Positive Change Trinity: Lean, Servant Leadership, and Maine

William Maxwell

*University of Southern Maine*, [william.maxwell@maine.edu](mailto:william.maxwell@maine.edu)

Joyce Gibson

*University of Southern Maine*, [jgibson@maine.edu](mailto:jgibson@maine.edu)

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# A Positive Change Trinity:

## Lean, Servant Leadership, and Maine

by William I. Maxwell and Joyce T. Gibson

### Abstract

This article is a call to action for Maine’s entrepreneurial servant leaders. We believe you can be a prime catalyst for positive change in Lean/Continuous Improvement initiatives across Maine. We are proposing that Maine’s servant leaders leverage the tool of Lean/Continuous Improvement to ignite a positive shift in organizational cultures. Our positive change trinity encompasses (1) Lean/Continuous Improvement as the process map of how to achieve new, sustainable growth; (2) servant leadership as the synergist that humanizes this growth in the territory of Maine workers’ lived experience; and (3) Maine’s forward-thinking businesses as the real-world hosts for this growth.

### INTRODUCTION

Alfred Korzybski (1933) famously pointed out that “the map is not the territory.” In this brief sentence, he reminds us not to confuse models of reality with reality itself. As we know, maps—as tools—come in many useful forms: processes, plans, and algorithms. Maps are instruments by which something is effected or done. Leadership, on the other hand, empowers us in the territory—in our lived experiences.

The positive change trinity in our title encompasses: (1) Lean/Continuous Improvement as the process map of how to achieve new, sustainable growth; (2) servant leadership as the synergist that humanizes this growth in the *territory* of Maine workers’ lived experience; and (3) Maine’s forward-thinking businesses as the real-world hosts for this growth. Therefore, we call out to Maine’s entrepreneurial servant leaders. We believe you can be a prime catalyst for positive change in Lean/Continuous Improvement initiatives across Maine. We are proposing that Maine servant leaders leverage the tool of Lean/Continuous Improvement to ignite a positive shift in organizational culture.

Lean/Continuous Improvement (we will use *Lean* as shorthand) provides proven analysis and process instruments. When implemented well, Lean enables organizations to achieve greater productivity, improved

quality, better customer service, reduced operating costs, and higher employee morale. Obviously, Maine organizations that improve in these areas enjoy a competitive advantage. It is also clear that some Lean initiatives fail and some succeed. Gallup research suggests that more than 70 percent of all large-scale organizational development attempts fail (Leonard and Coltea 2013). No definitive research exists regarding the success rate of Lean initiatives in

Maine, but anecdotal evidence indicates a similar mix of accomplishment and failure.

Long-term success requires a servant leadership that joins the two pillars of Lean: (1) respect people and (2) continuous improvement. The two are often dealt with separately in Lean literature; ways leaders can respect people are rarely highlighted. Lean’s change maps for continuous improvement focus on systemic approaches and tools; when these change maps are used without careful attention to respect for people, the chance for authentic success is diminished. The territory of lived experience, intricate and always changing, requires leaders to rise up to serve the larger group. Respect for people is at the heart of servant leadership—a simple phrase that implies the need for a complex understanding of what actions will best serve others. In order to make the maps meaningful as an experience for employees and customers, leaders need to create environments where the two pillars are united as one. Indeed, a powerful theme runs true in the successful Maine Lean initiatives: respectful servant leadership is a prime catalyst making continuous improvement possible and sustainable.

To make our case, we will first discuss Lean and its importance to Maine’s entrepreneurial and networking resources. We will then discuss how unifying the two pillars of Lean through servant leadership makes positive innovation more likely.

## THE POSITIVE CHANGE TRINITY

### Part One: Principles of Lean/ Continuous Improvement

Let's examine the second of Lean's pillars first: continuous improvement. An anonymous proverb says, "Vision without implementation is hallucination." Lean implementation tools are about improving processes. Lean doesn't arise from just what you see, though keen observation is key; Lean transforms organizations via the way one thinks. Lean practitioners Jamie Flinchbaugh and Andy Carlino (2006: 3) list five principles of Lean ways to think as follows:

- Directly observe work as activities, connections, and flows
- Systematic waste elimination
- Establish high agreement of what and how
- Systematic problem solving
- Create a learning organization

Neither sequential nor separate, these principles bring the synergy created by how they work together to create continuous improvement in real time. Flinchbaugh and Carlino (2006: 4) offer us a useful visual for "the house of lean principles" (Figure 1).

#### Principle one

Principle one, *directly observing work*, is sometimes associated with a *gemba walk*. Gemba is loosely translated as "real place." A gemba involves management going to where the work is being done to look for ways

to improve processes. Gemba walks are unscripted, and the idea is to gather data from all sources through respectful questioning and observations. The walks don't have to be physical; they are explorations of the work process. Principle one is about opening yourself up to seeing process and listening.

#### Principle two

Principle two, *systemic waste elimination*, is probably the most well-known aspect of Lean. Lean practitioners commonly talk about the seven wastes:

- Overproduction—producing more than customer needs or producing sooner than needed
- Transportation—movement of information, material, or paper
- Inventory—stockpiled parts, orders, time, or activities
- Motion—any movement, including walking and reaching, that is not related to value-added work
- Waiting—any downtime products or people spend waiting for material, information, or people
- Overprocessing—doing more to a product or process than the customer requires
- Defects—any process, product, or service error

To determine waste, Lean practitioners consider whether something is value added. To be considered value added, the activity must meet three criteria:

- The customer must value it and be willing to pay for it.
- It must change the form, fit, or function of the product or service.
- It must be done right the first time.

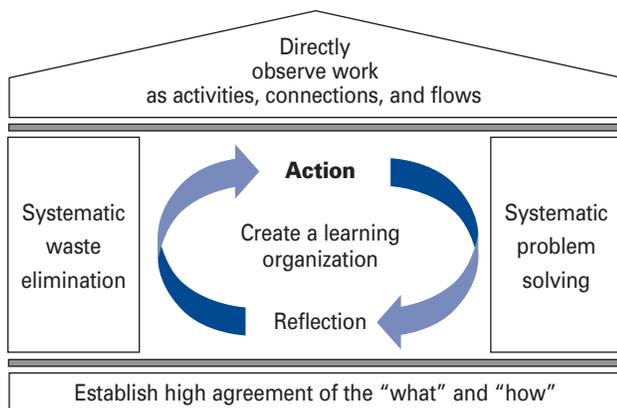
#### Principle three

Principle three, *establish high agreement of what and how*, involves people closest to an activity or process having clarity about what is to be accomplished and how to go about the process. Organizations tend to spend a great deal of time on the what: goals, objectives, and tasks. How refers to improving processes.

#### Principle four

Principle four, *systematic problem solving*, values finding and solving problems. A common Lean expression is, "No problem is a problem." Systematic problem

FIGURE 1: The House of Lean Principles



Source: Flinchbaugh and Carlino (2006).

solving is a mind-set that looks to see problems (large and small), bring them out into the open, and deal with them.

### Principle five

Principle five, *create a learning organization*, is often referred to as the glue of Lean—a learning organization ensures the continuous in continuous improvement. At the heart of a Lean learning organization is the “plan, do, check, act” cycle (PDCA) of practical experience in the workplace. Lean leaders are students and teachers in the learning organization (Flinchbaugh and Carlino 2006).

### What Lean isn’t and is

Lean isn’t just continuous improvement; to understand it this way is a disservice. Lean initiatives are more than eliminating waste, cuts, and a dog-eat-dog mind-set. Lean and greed have been conflated; however, when aligned with respectful leadership, Lean is never about greed. Lean practitioners who ignore the pillar of respect for people completely miss the Lean spirit of serving in the territory of lived employee experience.

As Sutherland and Sutherland (2014: 143) suggest, “Plan reality, not fantasy” and “Don’t fall in love with your plan. It’s almost certainly wrong.” Leaders empathetically aware of employee experiences in the territory, the place where the work is actually done, can embrace and inspire a cultural shift. Practitioners Liker and Convis underscore this need for a nuanced understanding: “The general conclusion that many practitioners of Lean have arrived at is that sustaining improvements requires a combination of top leadership commitment and a culture of continuous improvement” (Liker and Convis 2012: 4).

Said simply, true Lean involves respectful conversations between people with a shared mission. Further, instead of the stereotype that Lean is about cutting employees as part of eliminating waste, an authentic Lean message needs to be sent: “We would rather do more with the same number of people than the same with fewer people.” Eliminating the fear of staff reduction creates a safe place to tackle problems and fosters an environment that accelerates opportunities and productivity.

The information we just presented merely scratches the surface of the Lean methodology. So, too, is the Lean movement in Maine: it is only scratching the surface of what it can mean for Maine’s entrepreneurial spirit.

### Part Two: Servant Leadership and Lean

Lean’s pillar of respect for people requires the passion of servant leaders. Effective leadership generally means that the leader or CEO has an approach and style that moves an organization to realize its vision, satisfy its board and stakeholders, while honoring the mission of the organization. Improving profits, reorganizing for changing trends and markets, or just staying competitive in an increasingly technological, global market require leaders to be knowledgeable in their field, resourceful enough to attract employees with talents unknown to them, yet nimble enough to keep other organization afloat (Northouse 2018) Understanding continuous improvement and practicing lean management requires leadership from everyone in the organization, not just senior or positional leaders.

The leadership theory that most reflects the alignment between lean tools and continuous improvement maps is servant leadership. Robert K. Greenleaf, then a retired AT&T executive, published his book in 1977 after many years of studying organizations and observing how they functioned and were led. Greenleaf asserts that the most important characteristic of leadership is service, demonstrating that leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types of approaches to leading. He explains how being servant-first, not only strengthens people in the organization, but also shapes new leaders for the future:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served....The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? What is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf 1977: 27)

This approach does not deny the well-researched responsibilities of leaders in organizations who show the way and give direction to organizations. This distinctive philosophy of caring for and serving the individual, recognizing that leading requires everyone who is committed to the goals of the organization, everyone working on the challenges, everyone exploring his talents to meet each other’s need is what sets this approach apart from other types of leadership and aligns with how lean management works.

People from all types of institutions, businesses, educational institutions—public and private, governments, and religious—have identified and embraced Greenleaf’s service-first leadership approach because it works!

One would ask now, “How does servant leadership manifest in organizations?” Servant leaders act on what they believe. They enlist others by attending to their needs through listening, fostering learning environments, and staying true to doing what is right despite the challenges confronted. Greenleaf’s own description offers a perspective not practiced by most organizations today: A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the top of the pyramid, servant leadership is different. The servant leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible (Greenleaf 1977). Elements of this approach include listening, deep inner work, systems thinking, intuition, and foresight.

- *Listening*—is key to servant leadership because each employee knows it is a sign of respect. A leader who takes the time to learn what is happening with people and their activities, who accepts them and can empathize with their situations earns trust. Listening well, accepting, and empathizing does not preclude meeting established goals or demanding high performance. Lean culture encourages anyone in the organization to generate ideas as a way to learn how it might add to more-efficient operations. When there is a problem, leaders should listen to the front-line people in most organizations as they have deep experience with how things function day to day.
- *Deep inner work*—refers to taking the time to know oneself, understanding one’s values and the principles one lives by. Critical and honest reflections on mistakes and successes and appreciating how they have shaped one’s life experience, even how they differ from another’s experience and background, are important grounding for leaders.
- *Systems thinking*—is thinking about challenges holistically, not just about one aspect of a problem or just a few people, but the ultimate impact on

everyone. Senge’s (1990) work on the learning organization emphasizes understanding the intersections of the patterns that manifest the “making the full patterns clearer, thus helping us to see how to change them effectively.” Understanding how each activity is related to or influences another is essential to creating a process and solution for continuous improvement that is sustainable.

## A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong.

- *Intuition*—is a feeling or an insight about what to do or what decisions to make about a new situation. It requires a deep level of experience that allows that sense to be realized. Servant leaders act on their intuition because they trust their experiences based on what Greenleaf calls an overarching conceptual insight, not a gimmick.
- *Foresight*—is knowing what to expect and how to plan for the future and is often viewed as the most important skill of servant leaders. Foresight is not the same as vision; it is a process of gathering intelligence through listening, observing trends, understanding the market, understanding those the leader serves in relation to what is happening in the world.

When challenges arise—whether a demand for greater services or an internal glitch or breakdown of some kind—organizations that fully practice lean leadership are able to assess and determine different courses of actions quickly. These organizations have personnel who fully understand the organization and are monitoring and assessing their processes on a regular basis and leaders paying attention to internal and external forces affecting the organization. Determining whom to blame is not the immediate focus; instead, they focus on the processes that might have malfunctioned or the factors affected the expected results.

### *Part Three: Implications for Positive Outcomes in Maine*

Using the Lean servant leadership model that combines the two pillars of Lean is not only important for local or regional businesses and organizations, but also for the state. The growth, innovation, and quality resulting from this model are consistent with efforts to reinvigorate the Maine economy. Lean servant leadership embodies the same spirit displayed in the partnership between the Maine Development Foundation (MDF) and the Maine State Chamber of Commerce (MSCC). Since 2010, these two organizations have brought the forces of education, businesses, and nonprofits to work together to address the challenges of an aging workforce. In a joint MDF and MSCC press release (December 16, 2014), Harold Clossey, former CEO and president of MDF, succinctly stated “our strategic focus is a productive workforce that is educated, healthy, innovative and engaged in the economy and their community.” These two organizations began releasing reports every two years after conducting research on topics affecting the workforce. The reports offer updates on the progress of the economy while providing recommendations on which organizations could collaborate to move forward.

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The MSCC’s two major goals also resonate with engaging a Lean model to drive the economy since one of their findings was that an overwhelming number of businesses believe the critical need was for an available and skilled workforce. Education, accessibility, skills, commitment for sustainability are all implied here and reflected in these goals:

Goal 1: The Maine State Chamber of Commerce will help Maine reach and sustain

2-3% Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth throughout the forecast by continuously improving the underlying processes that drive business investment throughout the state.

Goal 2: The Maine State Chamber of Commerce will enhance the quality of life for all Mainers by supporting processes that balance financial, social, and environmental needs of our communities. (MSCC 2013)

Implicit in the MSCC’s goal setting is an understanding that change is needed for development and sustainability of the economy in order to meet the needs of the communities. Sustaining existing businesses and attracting new businesses to Maine has been challenging. The challenges are related to the need for workers with higher educational levels and more skilled workers in technological fields. An overriding challenge involves leaders’ capacities to think bigger, to imagine greater success. This Lean leadership model relates well to some of the activities the MSCC pledged under these goals. One activity involves building a network of corporate, not-for-profit, and academic relationships. Another pledged activity is increasing total investment in large and small businesses while creating greater access to research, development, and innovation.

Lean’s two-pillars model builds entrepreneurial cultures, increases innovation, and is a catalyst for attracting loyalty of those the leader serves. The Lean servant leadership model will also help sustain the existing workforce while increasing diversity. More people from inside and outside the state will want to engage in what the Maine economy has to offer.

The Lean servant leadership path is already established with success stories in Maine. Examples of businesses that are already embracing this model include

- Rancourt & Co—established in 1967 and now an international shoe company, Rancourt has employed Lean manufacturing since the 1990s and attributes its ability to evolve and remain profitable to the principles of continuous improvement.
- Geiger—known to those of us in Maine as Geiger Brothers, is the largest family-owned promotional distributor firm in the United States, with 16 operations across the country and headquarters in Lewiston, Maine. The “Geiger Way” is all about quality, continuous improvement, and serving the customer. At Geiger,

serving the customer means serving the staff first, including employing a manager of continuous improvement to support the workforce.

That these and other organizations are already thriving through Lean is encouraging. Based on recent data from the Lewiston Auburn (LA) Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, there is a lag in local organizations in terms of growth. One issue slowing expansion is that assistance for entrepreneurial initiatives has been lacking, but this gap is being filled.

The authors are part of a pilot project intending to enhance the Lewiston-Auburn region's entrepreneurial business culture by implementing a Lean Management/Continuous Improvement Leadership Education (LM/CILE) program. The program will consist of courses, mentorship, and an interactive network. LM/CILE implementation and mentorship will help create and sustain economic development and innovation in the Lewiston-Auburn (LA) region and throughout Maine. Innovation is the critical link between ideas and the market.

The pilot project is sponsored by the Institute for Continuous Improvement (ICI) and represents a new and important collaboration between the LA Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn College (LAC), which will organize, develop, and implement the pilot program. The grant provides the MSCC-LAC partnership the ability to enhance the productivity, prosperity, and growth of Maine businesses, organizations, and companies through improved leadership and management strategies and techniques.

Outcomes from the pilot project will include

- increasing business development and growth in the LA region through teaching Lean and leadership practices that positively affect the entrepreneurial culture;
- establishing an inventory of Lean practitioners and an interactive mentorship network to support the region's business community; and
- creating a sustainable LM/CILE program in the LA region and beyond.

The pilot project attracted experienced Lean business partners and funding from the state to begin what will be a strong engine to enhance the economy and support community development across the regions.

## CONCLUSION

Effective servant leadership aligned with Lean's effective maps can give Maine organizations a competitive edge. Success in our positive change trinity depends on Maine servant leaders who challenge the process. As a leader, please consider Lean as an effective tool. The two pillars of Lean, respect people and continuous improvement, require holding both ideas in mind simultaneously. This unity grounds servant leaders in terms of purpose and informs all of their actions.

Kouzes and Posner (2012: 157) point out "you don't get anyplace different if you just keep doing the same things over and over again." Successful Lean leaders seek opportunities by looking at processes to improve. They are willing to take incremental risks, to experiment, and to learn from both successes and failures. "Leaders don't challenge for challenge's sake" (Kouzes and Posner 2012: 169). Instead, they challenge with a sense of meaning and purpose. Lean practitioner Joakim Ahlstrom (2015) believes challenging the process is far better than leaving things alone. "Taking the first steps into the unknown may seem frightening, particularly if it means that you might come up against opposition or make mistakes. In comparison, talking is a safe activity, but if you want to make a real difference you need to stop talking and start making improvements" (Ahlstrom 2015: 14).

In conclusion, we ask you to consider making a real difference as a servant leader by leading with Lean in Maine. 🐟

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**William Maxwell** is the founder of Bill Maxwell and Associates, a leadership and change consulting business. Maxwell is also a facilitator with the newly formed Maine Leadership Group. Additionally, he is an instructor at the University of Southern Maine in the Leadership and

Organizational Studies Department. Maxwell has presented nationally and internationally on a variety of topics, including leadership and change, the leader's journey, and detoxifying the workplace.



**Joyce Taylor Gibson** has been dean of the University of Southern Maine's (USM) Lewiston-Auburn College for nine years and is transitioning to full-time teaching in USM's Leadership and Organizational Studies Program for fall 2018.

Prior to serving in Maine, she was an associate professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and also served as associate vice chancellor responsible for enrollment management and student affairs. Gibson is an experienced leader in student affairs, community-university partnerships, and organizational change, with social justice as her lens.